

P I C T U R E E S S A Y

Early American Towns and Cities



EUROPEAN COLONISTS OFTEN DEPICTED the Indians they encountered in North America as “wandering savages,” hunting people who lacked permanent settlements. Americans inherited this view and the United States government incorporated it into its Indian policies which, throughout the nineteenth century, operated on the conviction that Indians must be taught to farm and live in one place if they were ever to become “civilized.” The notion that Indians were nomads who lived in small hunting bands with no fixed homes helped justify their dispossession: Euro-Americans needed the land for agriculture and they had every right to take it because the Indians were not using it anyway.

Throughout North America, Indian people lived in small villages *and* hunted. In some areas, Indians were nomadic and followed game in small hunting bands. But most Indians were farmers and some inhabited towns that were as large as those of contemporary Europeans and colonists. Southwestern Indian peoples constructed multistory apartment buildings; Mississippian societies erected towns and temples on earthen mounds; Iroquoian people lived in towns of multifamily longhouses surrounded by palisades and cornfields. Arriving in the wake of Indian losses to epidemic diseases, Europeans often saw only traces of the civilizations that had existed in North America. On the basis of these impressions, history books portrayed Indian people as only hunters and village dwellers, rarely as farmers and city dwellers.

As the illustrations here indicate, there was an “urban America” long before Europeans arrived. The ruins and remains of some of these places provide clues to American Indian worlds and experiences that must have been very different from those described by most European observers and most American historians.

Pueblo Bonito (Beautiful Town) (Figure 1.1) was the largest of the towns built in Chaco Canyon. It was a planned, multistoried community of between 650 and 800 rooms laid out as a giant D-shaped amphitheater around a central plaza covering three acres. The walls were constructed of stones and filled with rubble; thousands of wooden roof beams were made from logs carried from almost fifty miles away. Ring-dated beams indicate that Pueblo Bonito was built between A.D. 919 and 1085.

At Mesa Verde in southeastern Colorado, people were living in many small villages on top of the mesa as early as A.D. 700. As the villages increased in size, the inhabitants developed more sophisticated structures and building techniques. By 1150, most of the inhabitants were living in large cliff houses constructed within



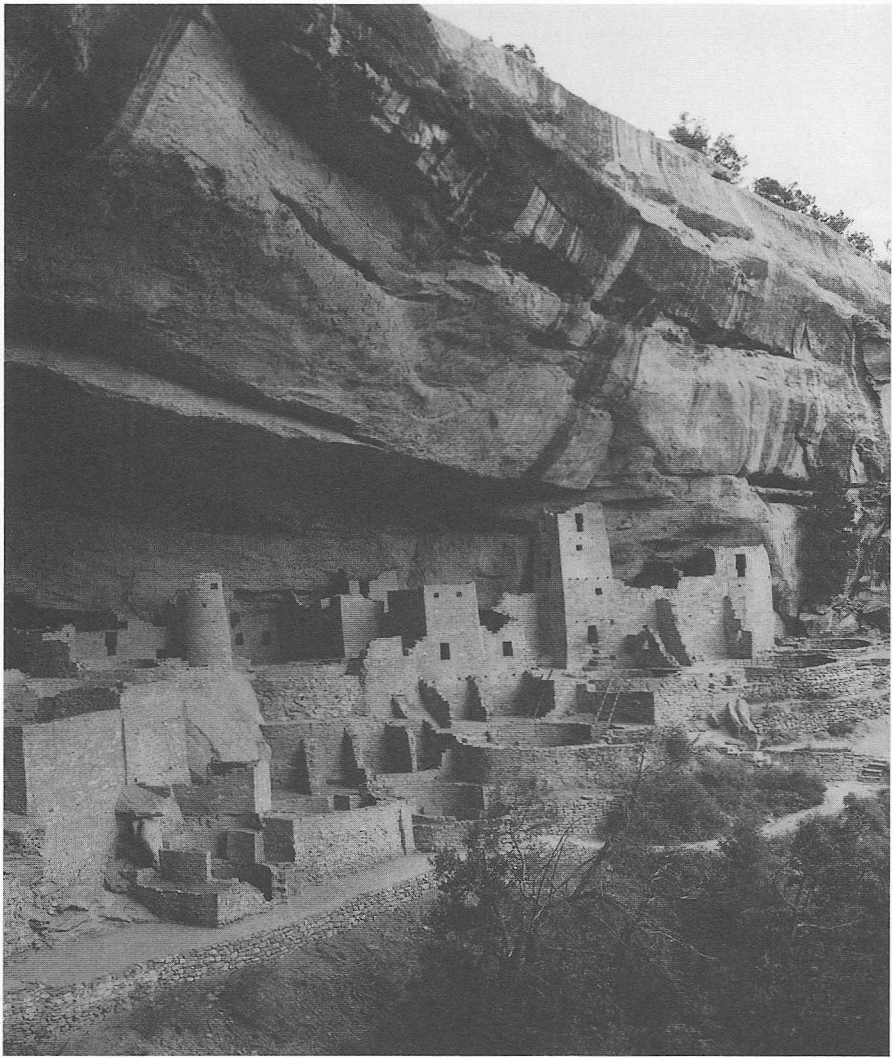
◆ **Figure 1.1 Aerial Photograph of the Ruins of Pueblo Bonito**

Courtesy, National Park Service, Chaco Culture National Historical Park. Chaco Archive Neg. No. 30626.

the huge caves in the canyon walls, which provided security against attack. As many as seven thousand people may have lived in the area. Cliff Palace (Figure 1.2) was the largest cliff dwelling in the area, with two hundred rooms and twenty kivas, but there may have been between five hundred and one thousand cliff houses at Mesa Verde during its peak in the mid-thirteenth century.⁵⁵

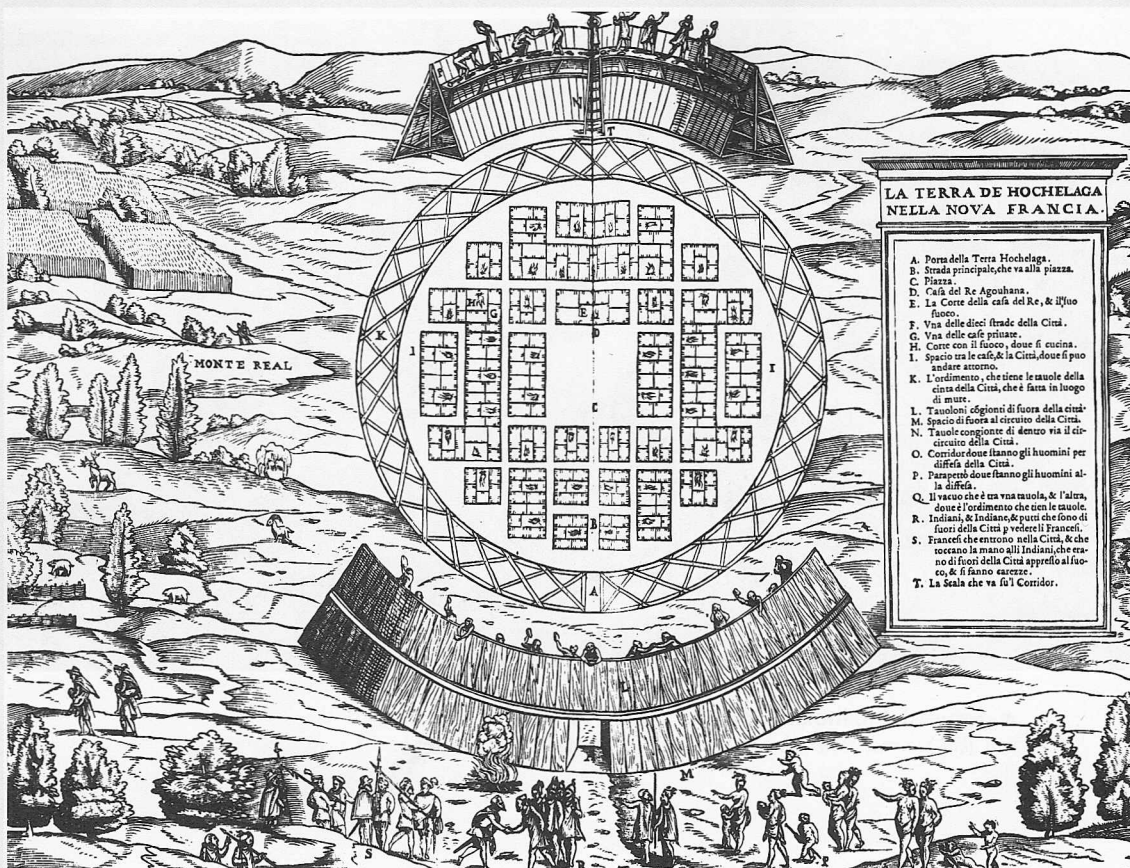
As people abandoned some sites, they congregated in others. By the time Spaniards arrived in New Mexico around 1540, Indian populations were concentrated in the Rio Grande valley and they were living in towns (which the Spaniards called pueblos). Taos Pueblo (Figure 1.3), photographed here in the 1870s, had been inhabited for centuries before Europeans arrived. It is still inhabited today.

At its height around A.D. 1050 and 1250, Cahokia (Figures 1.4 and 1.5) covered two thousand acres and was the largest city north of Mexico, with a popula-



◆ **Figure 1.2 Cliff Palace at Mesa Verde**
Arizona State Museum, University of Arizona.

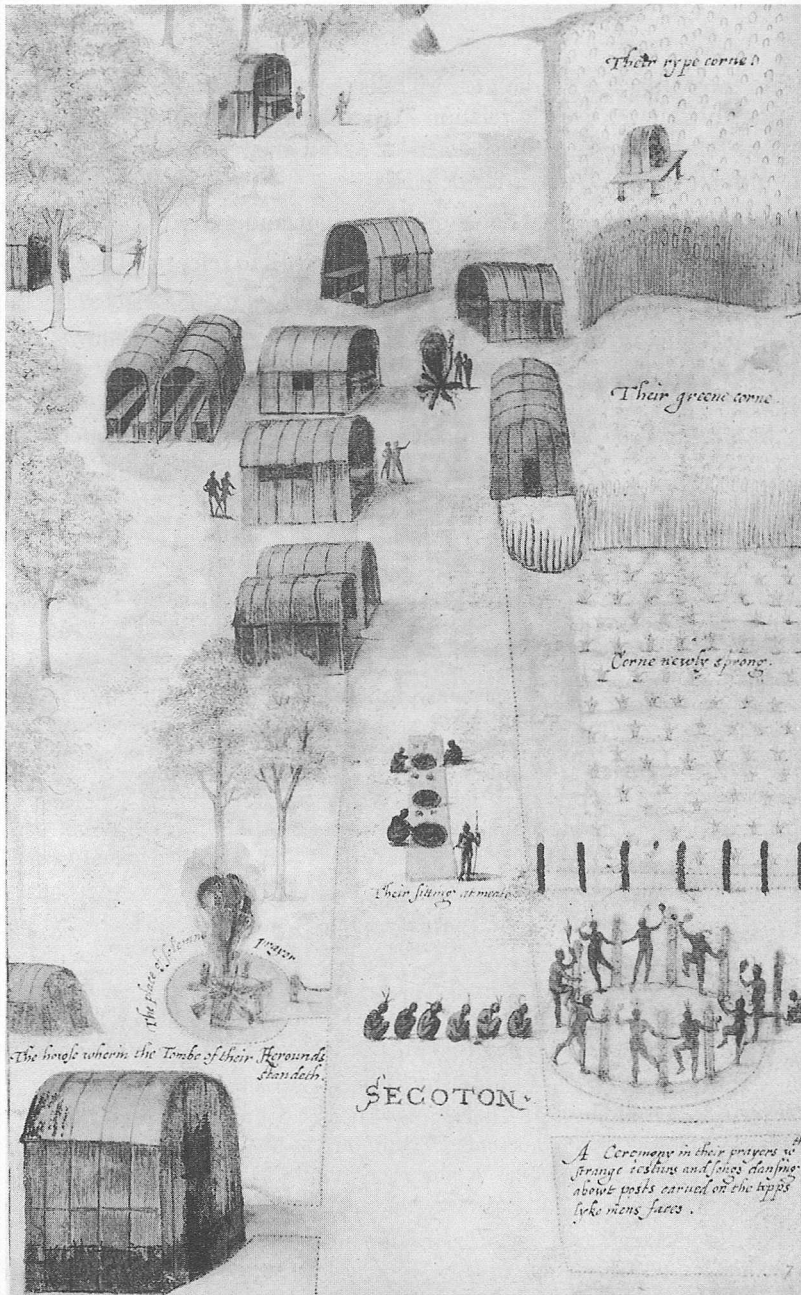
tion of at least 10,000 and perhaps more than 30,000 residents. By contrast, Philadelphia, the largest city in colonial North America, had a population of only 23,000 as late as 1763. Cahokia was a city of ceremonial pyramids, open plazas, extensive cornfields, satellite villages, and suburbs. The rectangular field with two poles in the middle of the plaza was a ball court. The circle of posts at the far



◆ Figure 1.6 Hochelaga

Newberry Library.

bent over and covered with bark and woven mats that could be removed to let in air and light. The inhabitants depended on corn and practiced field rotation (note the three fields of corn at different stages of growth at the right of the picture—“rype corne,” “greene corne,” and “corne newly sprung”), but supplemented their diet with hunting. A fire burns at “the place of solemne prayer” while, across the main street, a ritual is in progress. White’s English viewers would have recognized many similarities with English towns and fields. It is possible that White’s *Indian Village* was a composite painting, depicting various aspects of Indian life.



◆ Figure 1.7 John White, *Indian Village of Secoton* (1585)

© The Trustees of the British Museum.